**No easy way to fix problem in publication ethics**

Retraction of an article effectively means the death of a written output or a communication of ideas and findings of research. With that one action, it is assumed that by barring a piece of bad research, the integrity of science has been preserved and the offender, has been punished. And that such punishment would act as deterrence for the others in the future.

The IJME recently retracted one such article published on \ April 30, 2018 as Online First in the Comment section of the journal. On 08 May 2018 we received a complaint from the Karolinska Institute (KI) that such a person did not work with them. On inquiry, we discovered that the author had not only lied about the institutional affiliation, but also provided a pseudonym. On being discovered, the author admitted the guilt, revealed true identity to the editor, and made a case that disclosure of identity would lead to adverse repercussions. After verifying the identity, the relevant qualification and true affiliation of the author, and the likely risk of adverse repercussions to the author in disclosing the identity, the journal decided to provide anonymity to the author.

At the same time the scientific content of the article was re-reviewed internally and the peer review process, including all email exchanges, re-assessed. The manuscript was received on 30 October 2017, reviewed twice by one international and two Indian experts (expertise included public health, vaccine research and statistics); and revised three times with a Working Editor of the journal contributing and coordinating the process. We did not find anything amiss in our manuscript handling and the scientific content. Besides, the article was analysing a data set freely accessible on the Internet and employed statistical analysis that could be verified easily.

On 09 May 2018, we published a correction (1), informing readers that the author name was a pseudonym, the affiliation was removed and that the author cannot disclose real name and affiliation due to fear of repercussion. At the same time, we stated the unacceptability of the deception by the author and cautioned that in the genuine situation where author is not able to disclose identity, the editor’s permission for anonymity should have been sought beforehand.

This was followed by intense, and at times, abusive, reaction from many on the social media and blogs against the journal for continued publication of the article and for allowing a cheat author, the anonymity. After extensive consultation, including very helpful contribution by the members of the editorial board of the journal, we retracted the article on 26 May 2018. We stated in our retraction statement: “….. we received valuable advice from our editorial board and other well-wishers, emphasising that there should be zero tolerance to the author’s deception, irrespective of the content of the paper. While our assessment of the science of the article may be correct, we have concluded that tolerating the author’s deception and retaining the article was an error of judgment. We express our deep gratitude to them and have accepted their advice.” (2)

While we seem to have ended an episode, on reflection, it has brought as much relief as raised new questions. The reflection provides reasons to believe that there are no easy answers to such questions, let alone easy way of fixing them.

**Reflection on the death of an article:**

**Double standards?** As stated earlier, we were completely taken aback by the abusive reactions from some eminent scholars. We therefore needed to understand whether such reaction was due to our inadequacies or the double standard of the commentators. It seemed our location (India), not having backing of a corporate publishing house and small size supported only by charity played a role in many assuming us to be less diligent and not worthy of respect while discussing differences. Our failure to detect deception, it was assumed, was an evidence of how badly we were organised and committed. However, none provided us with information on what a robust system for verifying author identity and affiliation is, and the number of journals using it.

On the contrary, we found that even the best of the journals of the world are having as good or as bad system as ours. The author who deceived the IJME has been publishing in various journals with the same pseudonym and institutional affiliation since 2014. We could identify at least four such publications of the author in two journals, the Journal of Internal Medicine (JIM, published by the Wiley) and Vaccine (published by the Elsevier) from the developed counties. After we made this discovery public, there was absolutely no furore against those journals by those who were abusing the IJME. When the attention of the JIM was drawn to the issue, the journal first inserted expression of concern and only on 02 July 2018 retracted (3). The article (the letter) published by the Vaccine is still available on its website with the KI being shown as author’s affiliation (4).

The KI was justifiably upset with the IJME for allowing an author to falsely claim affiliation to the KI. The IJME was strongly admonished for its laxity and for allowing the author to remain anonymous. However, the author was using the KI affiliation in various journals since 2014, without the KI expressing any outrage. Besides, the author had, using the same pseudonym, in 2015 filed a complaint of research misconduct against researchers of the KI, and the KI had investigated this complaint for one year by appointing an external investigator. Although the investigation did not establish misconduct, it did force the researchers in 2016 to publish a correction or addendum to their paper published in the JIM (5). And yet, the KI’s robust system could never detect that it was being deceived.

Thus, this experience showed us that the claims of existence of robust system of detecting identity and affiliation of author in resource rich journals and institutions in highly developed countries need more evidence. While we do more cross-checking on the author now than earlier, we are still unaware of existence of any organised near-perfect system for such detection. We are, rather, convinced after this experience that we all need to be humble about our capabilities, and have realistic expectations. We hope the associations and committees of journal editors would develop a robust system and make it available widely for journals like ours for use.

**Deception by author: Does the intent matter?** We retracted the article due to the deception of the journal by the author, and not because of the use of bad science or any unethical conduct in research. By doing this we followed the dictum of zero tolerance to the deception by the author, and we admitted our error in not doing so as soon as the deception was detected.

At the same time, this episode also made us aware that the zero tolerance is a principle that simplifies responsibility of the journal or just gives it a sense of satisfaction of dealing with a problem, without providing a satisfactory and nuanced response to the complexity of problem involved. Are we justified in having one reaction or uniform punishment for deception irrespective of the nature and intent of the deception?

In this context, we were reminded of the never-ending discussion on the ghost-written papers published in the journals. Their number is not insignificant. A study published in the JAMA of 809 articles in 1998 estimated that in 19% of them there was evidence of honorary authors, in 11% of the ghost-authors and in 2% of both (6). Such articles are written by authors who do not get due credit as authors while the authors who get credit are not the real authors. Is this not deception on a large scale perpetrated in broad day-light with full knowledge of all those who matter in the scientific publishing?

In fact, the deception in the authorship attribution is only a part of the problem. The ghost-writers are highly qualified employees of the medical writing companies, which are paid by the research sponsors (normally the pharma companies) to cleverly match the intellectual content of research with the commercial objectives of the sponsor. Thus, such manuscripts not only deceive journals about the true-identity of authors but also falsify or deceptively present the outcome of research or review. The intentional transgression, therefore, is not just of morality but also of science.

The companies doing scientific writing and their writers have made efforts to overcome the charge of authorship deception and the tag of ghost-writers by acknowledging names of the real writers in the manuscripts without providing them authorship. But such efforts have been rightfully criticised because, ghost-writing is not mere deception but also manipulative matching of the content with the marketing objective of the sponsors (7).

Interestingly, despite high estimated numbers published in the medical journals, we failed to find examples of the retraction of the ghost-written articles. We need to reflect whether this is because of lack of robust system or we have allowed ourselves to be a part of the nexus for material gains.

How does this contract with an author using deception due to perceived threat of repercussion, but without any intent to manipulate science and material gain, as was the present case? We retracted the paper because we agreed with the position that justification of one could open justification for a larger system of wrong-doing. But should the furore end with the punishment of a petty thief while the system tolerates the systematic deception?

**Anonymity:** Should journals have latitude to allow some authors anonymity for justifiable reasons? For anonymity is not deception of the journal because the person designated by the journal, normally the editor, knows the identity, affiliation and reasons for anonymity of the author(s); and have expressly agreed to protect them. While the consent of readers for provision of anonymity to author(s) is not obtained, the fact of anonymity is not concealed from readers, who have liberty to choose to appreciate or not read the content of article without knowing the author. To ask readers to make such choice is not so easy in the era of populism, as they may perceive the grant of anonymity as disrespect of the readers, or at least some of them. However, the respect for the insurmountable difficulties of author needs to be weighed against this feeling of the readers. Besides, just as all cases of deception do not compromise science, the anonymity on its own is not a compromise of science.

This episode made us aware that there is a strong, and perhaps a dominant view that in scientific publishing and, also, in bioethics, there is no place for the anonymity of author. Does such view emanate from the secure environment of academic and the comfort with the current corporate arrangement of the publishing with its rules of the game? Does this view take into account the interest of scientists whose security of job and sometimes even life are at grave risk for pursuing their scientific interests?

There are many situations where the scientists may be at risk in disclosing their identity in scientific communication. The scientists working in the companies may face situations where there is intolerant to even mild critical remarks in public, or there may those willing to blow whistle on the scientific claims. There may be scientists living under dictatorship and military occupations having data or information on violations for communication to the wider community. While appreciating reasoned articles on the regulatory capture by the regulated, do we also have some obligation to those willing to speak truth in the regulatory agencies but prevented by their job obligations?

Is it reasonable to expect that scientists at the risk of losing their livelihood or life must always show courage to communicate in journals without making a plea for the anonymity? Are they supposed to communicate only in the news-media where they may have a chance to get protection of identity, while the job of scientific journal is to nurture peacetime secure research?

We would like to end by saying that there is a need for serious discussion on the questions arising from this episode. Though we have felt them as a consequence of this episode, they have universal relevance. The current guidance on publications ethics does not provide sufficient material on deception and anonymity to resolve these issues. We would endeavour to publish more on the subject in coming time and would support initiatives that could evolve system for tackling challenges faced in journal publishing.

**References:**

(1) Editors, Statement on Correction, IJME, 09 May, 2018, <http://ijme.in/articles/statement-on-corrections/?galley=html> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2018.040>

(2) Editors, RETRACTION: Increased incidence of cervical cancer in Sweden: Possible link with HPV vaccination, IJME, 26 May 2018, <http://ijme.in/articles/retracted-increased-incidence-of-cervical-cancer-in-sweden-possible-link-with-hpv-vaccination/?galley=html> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2018.057>

(3) See retraction notices by the Journal of Internal Medicine at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/joim.12246> and at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/joim.12246>

(4) The un-retracted article (letter) at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264410X17312719?via%3Dihub>

(5) I. Persson & N. Feltelius, Response to letter from Lars Andersson, Journal of Internal Medicine, 20 December 2014, available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/joim.12573>

(6) Annette Flanagin; Lisa A. Carey; Phil B. Fontanarosa; Stephanie G. Phillips; Brian P. Pace; George D. Lundberg; Drummond Rennie; Prevalence of Articles With Honorary Authors and Ghost Authors in Peer-Reviewed Medical Journals, JAMA, 1998: Vol.280, No.3; 222-4

(7) Alastair Matheson, Ghostwriting: the importance of definition and its place in contemporary drug marketing, BMJ, 2016: 354:i4578 doi: 10.1136/bmj.i4578 (Published 30 August 2016)